

**IS SEEING JUST LIKE FEELING?**  
**KINDS OF EXPERIENCE AND THE FIVE SENSES**

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In this paper I am going to argue that two commonly held views about perceptual experience are incompatible and that one must be given up. The first is the view that the five senses are to be distinguished by appeal to the kind of experiences involved in perception; the second is the view – called Representationalism – that the subjective character of perceptual experience is solely determined by what the experience represents. We could take their incompatibility as a reason for rejecting Representationalism; but I will suggest that it's open to the Representationalist to claim that the experiences of a single sense need have no common character.

On those occasions that we think or talk about the way that we perceive things we commonly employ a distinction between five different *ways* of perceiving; that is, we distinguish five different senses. This distinction, although perhaps not universal, is very widespread; part of what is often called 'common-sense psychology'.

Just as we inquire into the nature of common-sense psychological states, we can inquire into the nature of the senses. An obvious question to ask is what the distinction between five senses consists in: when we distinguish different ways of perceiving, what is it that we are distinguishing between? What kind of thing is a sense?<sup>1</sup>

An answer to that question is constrained by the fact that one can both see particular things, and see the features of things. One can, for example, see the

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<sup>1</sup> To answer that we need to say how each sense differs from the others and what all the perceptions of that sense have in common in virtue of which they are of that sense.

glass, and one can see the shape of the glass. Exactly the same is true of touch. One might feel the glass, and one might feel the shape of the glass. Any account of what the distinction between the senses consists in – of what kind of thing a sense is – needs at least to explain in virtue of what one sees the glass or its shape, rather than feels it.

One way to go about providing such an explanation is by appeal to the kinds of experiences involved in perception.

Now in general, a necessary condition for one to perceive something is that one discriminates that thing in virtue of having a perceptual experience as of its being some way. The reasons for thinking this are familiar: we wouldn't say, of someone who either entirely lacked experience of some thing or whose experience of it was produced in some peculiar non-standard way, that they perceived it.<sup>2</sup> Plausibly, satisfying this condition is sufficient for one to perceive something, too, although whether it is or not doesn't much matter for my purposes.

Whatever condition in general must be satisfied in order to perceive some thing is the same whichever sense one perceives it with. We can, though, provide more determinate versions of this general condition corresponding to each of the senses. Such a determinate condition for seeing would be something like the following. One sees some thing only if one discriminates it in virtue of having a visual experience of its being some way. The one for touch would mention tactual experience, and so on for the other senses. The general condition applies to perception with any of the senses; what changes for each sense is the kind of experience involved.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that discrimination needn't be causal, but see e.g. Grice, "The Causal Theory of Perception"; Lewis, "Veridical Hallucination and Prosthetic Vision".

That suggests how we might explain the distinction between the senses. The senses are distinct in virtue of the kinds of experiences involved in perceiving some thing with them. If one perceives something in virtue of having a visual experience of it, then one sees it. One sees the glass (rather than feels it) because one perceives it in virtue of having a visual (rather than a tactual) experience of it. Similarly, one sees the shape of the glass because one perceives its shape in virtue of having a visual experience of it.

Although that does provide some explanation, it doesn't quite provide a full one. It doesn't do so because it doesn't tell us in virtue of what we classify experiences into five kinds corresponding to the senses. What is it that all visual experiences have in common in virtue of which they are *visual* experiences?

Experiences have a subjective character. By subjective character I mean that aspect of an experience which determines what it is like for one to have the experience. I suspect that many philosophers, if asked in virtue of what experiences are *visual*, would say that experiences can be distinguished into kinds in virtue of their subjective character. I suspect that they'd say that because they assume that if two experiences are of the same kind then they must have some property of their subjective character in common, and that if two experiences have the same subjective character then they are the same kind of experience.<sup>3</sup>

If experiences can be distinguished into kinds in virtue of their subjective character, then it follows that all visual experiences must have some aspect of their subjective character in common, and it is in virtue of that that they are visual experiences. As E.J Lowe says, "an experience qualifies as a visual experience purely by virtue of its intrinsic phenomenal or qualitative character..." (1992,

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<sup>3</sup> One might reason something like this. The fact that two experiences are distinguishable doesn't necessary mean that they are of fundamentally different kinds. Nonetheless, anyone who take subjective indistinguishability to be sufficient for sameness of kind will take kinds to be determined by subjective properties. That is because whether two experiences are indistinguishable is determined by their subjective properties, so identity of subjective properties must be sufficient for sameness of kind.

p.80). The same will be true for the kinds of experience associated with each of the other senses. It follows, too, that the experiences of different senses must be distinguishable in virtue of their subjective character. The senses would, in other words, be distinct in virtue of the subjective character of the experiences involved in perceiving. A. D Smith holds just such a view. Experiences, he says, “possess, and are differentiated by, intrinsic experiential features... Such sensory characteristics of experience go to define a sense modality.” (1990, p.239). As I said, I think that many philosophers hold a similar view.

In the next section I will argue that, if the senses are distinct in virtue of the subjective character of the experiences involved in perceiving, then a popular account of the nature of perceptual experience – a view I label Representationalism – must be wrong.

The representational theory of perception claims that one’s perceptual experience represents the world as being a certain way. It claims that one’s experiences – like one’s beliefs – have representational content; an experience is veridical if the world matches its content, otherwise it is illusory. My experience is the way it is in virtue of the way it represents things as being. When I describe my experience by saying that it looks to me as if there is a vase of flowers in front of me, I simply describe how my experience represents the world to be, namely, how the world would have to be in order for my experience to be veridical.

What I am calling a Representationalism is the view of someone who holds a particular version of the representational theory of perception according to which it is possible to explain the subjective character of experience solely by appealing to its representational content.<sup>4</sup> A Representationalist typically accepts something like Fred Dretske’s Representational Thesis; that is the thesis “that all mental facts are representational facts” (Naturalizing the Mind, p.i). Someone who accepts this

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<sup>4</sup> One can of course accept the representational theory of perception without being a Representationalist.

thesis will claim, as Dretske does, that “the quality of experience, how things seem to us at the sensory level, is constituted by the properties things are represented as having. My experience of an object is the totality of ways that object appears to me, and the way an object appears to me is the way my senses represent it.” (Dretske, p.1). Since Dretske thinks that the subjective character of experience is wholly determined by the content of that experience, he is committed to claiming that differences in subjective character entail differences in representational content.

Michael Tye holds a similar view; he says that “Representationalism [about experience] is a thesis about the phenomenal character of experiences, about their immediate subjective ‘feel’. At minimum the thesis is one of supervenience: necessarily, experiences which are alike in their representational contents are alike in their phenomenal character.”<sup>5</sup> This kind of view has become very popular of late, so popular in fact that it could be said to have become something of an orthodoxy. Its popularity seems to be due to the fact that is thought (by its proponents) to provide a solution to the so-called ‘hard problem’ of consciousness.

One will reject Representationalism if one thinks that what it’s like to have an experience is not determined solely by what that experience represents – that the subjective character of an experience is partly determined by properties the experience has in addition to its representational properties. Such properties are usually called ‘sensational properties’ or ‘qualia’ (e.g. Peacocke, *Sense and Content*, ch.1); they are whatever non-representational properties an experience has which, together with its representational properties, determine its subjective character.

On the face of it Representationalists have a problem in explaining the distinction between the five senses. We perceive some properties (which we can label

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<sup>5</sup> *Consciousness, Color, and Content*, p.46, p. 93. See also *Ten Problems of Consciousness*.

‘common-sensibles’) cross-modally, with more than one sense. Properties like shape, for example, can be perceived by both sight and touch.<sup>6</sup> Since shape is a common-sensible, visual and tactual experiences of a shape represent the same property. The Representationalist is therefore committed to claiming that what it is like to see the shape of a square is just what it is like to feel the shape of a square, in respect of that property. For as long as the experiences represent the same property then they have the same subjective character *in respect of that property*. Dretske accepts this implication of his view:

A blind person may know what it is like to visually experience movement. If he knows what movement is, that is enough. An experience of movement – whether it be visual, tactile, or kinaesthetic – has its qualitative character defined by what it is an experience (representation) of, and if these experiences are all of the same property, they are, subjectively, with respect to this single property, the same kind of experience (Naturalizing the Mind, pp. 94-5).

Despite being subjectively the same it is still the case that, on any occasion on which we perceive the shape of something, there is (with perhaps some rare exceptions) some fact of the matter as to whether we see the shape or not, a fact of the matter as to whether we see the shape or – say – feel it.

The Representationalist cannot explain this fact by appealing to our experience of the shape, since they claim that our experience, with respect to the shape, is the same whether we see the shape or feel it. Instead they appeal to properties which can be perceived only with a single sense. There are properties such as colour, for

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<sup>6</sup> This, incidentally, is an uncontroversial claim. It is perhaps only denied by someone who holds a Berkeleian or sense-datum view of experience. The Representationalist certainly ought not and does not deny it. Though see Dretske’s ‘Reply’ where he does seem to deny it, thereby rejecting the position he held in *Naturalizing the Mind*.

example, which can be perceived by vision and not by touch, and other properties such as temperature can be perceived by touch and not by vision. So if one sees something, one's experience represents it as having a range of properties different to the range of properties one's experience would have represented it as having had one touched it. The experiences associated with each of the senses is such that each typically represents objects as having a different range of properties. Thus, although the Representationalist must claim that the subjective character of one's experience of any 'common-sensible' is the same with respect to that property across the senses with which it is perceived, they are not committed to the claim that what it is like to see something square is the same as what it is like to feel something square. Seeing a square also involves seeing its colour while feeling a shape also involves feeling its temperature (say). The difference between seeing the shape and feeling it (and so what our seeing the shape consists in) is in what other properties we experience the object as having. Thus, as Dretske says, "even when the senses overlap in their representational efforts – as they do in the case of spatial properties – they represent different ranges of determinable properties" (1995, pp.94-5); the Representationalist can appeal to the "range of properties our experience represents [the object] as having" in order to distinguish the senses.<sup>7</sup>

What makes a perception of the shape of some thing an instance of seeing that shape is that one experiences the shape together with other properties of the object. It is the range of properties experienced that makes the experience a *visual* experience. One sees the object because one perceives it in virtue of having a visual experience of it; one sees the shape of an object because the experience in virtue of which one perceives the shape is a visual experience. We can gloss this as follows: what makes an experience of the shape of an object a visual experience

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<sup>7</sup> McGinn thinks something similar: "[although] different sense-modalities may present the same kinds of environmental feature, e.g. shape or texture – as with sight and touch – ... the subjectively distinct experiences that present these features also present other features...[the] differences in the range of contents available to different types of experience seem enough to capture the obvious phenomenological differences in the experiences associated with different senses." (1988, p.35).

is the fact that we experience the shape in conjunction with an experience of certain other properties of the object.

The problem with this account is that its explanation of the distinction between the senses is only plausible when we consider the operation of each of the senses independently of the others. It cannot explain the difference between the senses when they are used together, at the same time.

Suppose that one both sees and feels some object – a coin say. One will experience the coin as having a variety of properties, some of them felt and some of them seen. Suppose further that, although one sees the shape of the coin, one doesn't feel its shape. Not that one couldn't feel its shape; just that, on this occasion, one doesn't do so: it's held in one's hand in such a way that it is not possible to tell by feeling what shape it is.

In virtue of what is one's experience of the shape of the coin on this occasion a case of seeing the shape, rather than feeling it? It's perhaps tempting to answer by appealing to some fact about the way one experiences the shape, to the fact that one's experience of the shape is different to the experience that one would have had of the shape had one felt the shape. The Representationalist is committed to denying that there could be any such difference; instead, in order explain why one sees the shape, she must appeal to the other properties one experiences the coin as having. Such an explanation, however, is no good in this case. Given that one both sees and feels the coin, in addition to seeing the shape of the coin we can suppose that one experiences the coin as having – that one's experience will represent the coin as having – a range of properties associated with both visual and tactual perception. How can the fact that one experiences the shape together with these other properties of the coin determine that one sees, rather than feels, the shape? The fact that one's experience represents the object as having such a conjunction of properties is not sufficient to explain in virtue of what one sees the



shape. This is apparent if we compare the experience we would have in this example with the experience we would have in another, very slightly different, example.

Suppose that we change the way the example is described so that instead of seeing the shape, one feels it. We can describe the example in such a way that nothing else about one's experience of the coin changes. (The representationalist might deny that such is really possible, but to do so makes the truth of their view dependent on the plausibility of such a denial. If such a change is not possible, it's surely only for practical rather than metaphysical reasons).

Given the way that I have described the two examples, there need be no difference between the two cases in the properties that we experience the coin as having, yet there is a difference in the way that we experience the shape – in one case we see it, and in the other we feel it. There are no differences simply in what we experience to which the Representationalist could appeal in order to explain what this difference consists in.

The Representationalist view of experience entails that there is no difference between the two cases, but there is a difference. That shows Representationalism to be incompatible with the idea that the senses are to be distinguished by appealing to the kinds of experience involved in perception. What conclusion should we draw from this?

We might take this to show that experiences must have sensational properties, or qualia, in addition to their representational properties, and so conclude that Representationalism is false.<sup>8</sup> To do so would be to conclude, as Dominic Lopes

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<sup>8</sup> In 'Reply to Lopes', Dretske points out that the fact that we can tell that something is F by touch doesn't mean that we feel it as F. That's right, but the reason for claiming that we feel the shape of things is not that we can tell what shape things are by touching them. Rather, we have experiences which represent shape. This is a very strange way for Dretske to defend himself since it means denying the existence of

does, “that tactile and visual experiences have distinctive phenomenal characters through and through. What it is like to see the shape of a cube is different from what it is like to touch the same shape”.<sup>9</sup> Such a difference could only be explained by supposing that the subjective character of experience is partly determined by sensational properties.

If experiences have sensational properties then it would be plausible to claim that it is in virtue of their possession of them that they can be distinguished into five kinds corresponding to the senses.<sup>10</sup> What makes all visual experiences *visual* experiences on this view is that they share some sensational property which they don’t share with experiences of any other sense; it is in virtue of their possession of that property that they are visual experiences. The same would be true for the other senses.<sup>11,12</sup>

Whatever the merits of such a view, I don’t think it is obviously right; and the Representationalist doesn’t have to accept it. Instead she can give up the assumption that the experiences associated with different senses can be distinguished into kinds in virtue of their subjective character. How plausible is such a strategy? I introduced the idea that there are different kinds of experience

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common-sensibles. That’s not something he does in the book, nor something that anyone else does e.g. Tye, McGinn, Peacocke.

<sup>9</sup> “What is it like to see with your ears? The representational theory of mind”. PPR. March 2000, p. 445.

<sup>10</sup> Lopes suggest that appealing to qualities of experiences in order to distinguish the senses entails that concepts of seen-squares are different from concepts of felt-squares. That does not follow. We need to distinguish concepts of properties like square, from concepts of kinds of experience, like that of seeing a square. That distinction is obscured by talk of phenomenal concepts like ‘red’. They are observational concepts. (See the Lopes section on phenomenal concepts.)

<sup>11</sup> Most arguments against Representationalism for the existence of sensational properties are unconvincing. They usually appeal to the fact that two experiences with the same representational content have a different subjective character. They are not convincing because it just is not clear that we ever do have experiences with the same content which are subjectively different. Representationalists can always deny that the experiences have the same content, or deny that there is any subjective difference (both strategies are employed by Tye in CCC, sec. 4.3). My argument doesn’t depend on our accepting as correct descriptions of the subjective character of different experiences, but rather what is required in order to explain the difference between seeing and touching.

<sup>12</sup> That conclusion doesn’t immediately follow from the admission of sensational properties, however. Although the argument gives us a reason to suppose that any visual experience of some property must differ in its sensational properties from a tactual experience of that property, it doesn’t give us any reason for thinking that all visual experiences have some sensational properties in common. But that further step may seem quite small.

associated with each of the senses by appealing to different necessary conditions for perception. The truth of those necessary conditions doesn't entail that experiences can be distinguished in to kinds in virtue of their subjective character, rather than in virtue of some other property; rather, I suggested, it's something philosophers tend to assume.

If the Representationalist rejected that assumption she would have to appeal to some relational or non-intrinsic property of experiences in order to distinguish them into kinds. There are various different candidates, each of which is *prima facie* plausible. She might claim, for example, that what makes an experience a visual experience is that it is produced by the operation of a certain kind of psychological mechanism, or that its production involves the use of a particular sense organ. I am going to end by making a couple of comments about this kind of approach.

Firstly, someone who adopts this approach holds that there is nothing that the experiences associated with a single sense need have in common other than that they share the relational property. In particular, experiences of the same sense need have nothing subjectively in common. Similarly, there need be no subjective difference between the experiences of different senses – as we saw in the case of visual and tactual experiences of shape. I have not considered any reason the opponent of Representationalism may have for rejecting these consequences; it may be that there are such reasons. There may be reasons for thinking, for example, that merely having an experience with a certain subjective character is sufficient for one to apparently see something.

Secondly, for us to adopt such an approach it's not enough that the Representationalist point out the *prima facie* plausibility of distinguishing experiences by appeal to some non-intrinsic property; she has to show that there is some property to which we could appeal in making that distinction.

Now just as a matter of, as it were, sociological fact, every philosopher who has considered the question (since maybe Locke) has argued that there is no such property. They all point to a similar difficulty.

The problem, roughly, is this. When I introduced the idea that there were different kinds of experience involved in perception I did so in a way that made it plausible that we could appeal to these kinds of experience in order to say what perceiving with a particular sense consists in. One sees something just in case one perceives it in virtue of having a visual experience of it; seeing just is perceiving in virtue of having a visual experience.

Such an explanation presupposes that we can give some account of what makes an experience a *visual* experience independently of giving an account of what distinguishes the senses. The Representationalist cannot do that.<sup>13</sup> Whatever the relational property to which the Representationalist appeals in order to distinguish experiences into kinds, it must be sufficient to explain why we distinguish five kinds of experience; but if it can do that, then it must itself be sufficient to explain the distinction between the senses. Philosophers have rejected the approach I've argued Representationalism is committed to because no one has found a relational property sufficient to explain that distinction.

So, whilst I don't think that the incompatibility I have argued exists between Representationalism and the view that we can distinguish the senses by appeal to kinds of experience is fatal for Representationalism, there is, nonetheless, quite some work that its proponents must do in order to defend their view.

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<sup>13</sup> Rather than saying that seeing is that kind of perception which involves visual experience, they must say visual experience is that kind of experience involved in seeing.